

Database Exhibit Planning

Top Ten List

Here are ten important points to remember when using the National Park Service *Museum Exhibit Planner* application with FileMaker Pro for Mac or Windows. The most frequently asked questions are answered here.

1. Get the Right Stuff

Start off with the right hardware and software. FileMaker Pro does not require a souped-up computer, but it does work most efficiently on an up-to-date computer with a reasonable amount of memory, especially if you are incorporating graphics into the database. Use the latest version of FileMaker Pro, and the latest version of the *Museum Exhibit Planner*. Records can usually be quickly exported from an old template into a newer one. Call Harpers Ferry Center Interpretive Media Institute at 304-535-6057 for information on current versions. As with any computer application, it's important to have at least a little training in FileMaker Pro and the *Museum Exhibit Planner* application.

2. Exhibit Identification Numbers: L-01-001

Use the standard NPS exhibit numbering system. The database is designed to work with this system, and may not operate properly with alternative systems. An individual number is called the Exhibit Identification Number, or Ex ID No. for short. The Ex ID No is a vital part of the software and our production packages.

Each record—and therefore each element of the exhibit plan—has one of these unique numbers. It's a three-part number separated by hyphens. Each part is a separate field. "L-01-001" and "G-05-045" are examples of Ex ID Nos. The first part of the number gives the category of the element (Label, Graphic, Artifact, Digital layout, or Equipment.) The second part is the exhibit number. The last part is the item number. Exhibit element "A-04-012" would be an artifact in Exhibit 4, and the 12th item in the exhibit. Please note that item numbers do not repeat within an exhibit.

It is best to have item numbers reflect some logical order in the exhibit, such as from top to bottom, or from left to right. Using this method, "L-09-001" would likely be the title of Exhibit 9. Ex ID Nos. can be changed and renumbered in the database at any time using the "Quick List" screen.

Elements which do not yet have a final location in the exhibit may be temporarily given holding numbers such as "A-00-000" or "E-22-000." Avoid changing the form of Ex ID Nos., or adding extensions to them. Unconventional numbers will hamper the performance and consistency of the database program.

3. **Assigning Exhibit Numbers: L-01-001**

The middle section of the Ex ID No. is the Exhibit Number. It occupies two character spaces. Single-digit numbers such as “02” are preceded by a zero. It is strongly recommended that exhibit numbers be assigned in such a way as to limit the number of items in any one exhibit to less than 100.

In most cases it is better to have 25 smaller exhibits instead of 6 very large ones. For purposes of a Final Exhibit Plan, think of a numbered exhibit as a discrete physical structure that will be fabricated and installed as a unit, such as a 4x8’ graphic panel or a pedestal with a vitrine. The efficiency of the database program is defeated when broad theme areas of an exhibition are considered single exhibits for numbering purposes. The time to assign proper exhibit numbers is at the end of Concept Planning, before any final drawings are completed.

4. **Keep Labels Short**

Try to keep labels concise. To the extent that individual field entries become long or complex, the database becomes a less efficient way of working. This can become a problem if you make long text entries. The program is set to accept labels as long as one and a half pages, but it would be wise to keep them much shorter. If long labels are required, try to break them up into segments, each with its own Ex ID No. Another option is to prepare long entries as attachments, including only references in the database. Park visitors will also appreciate concise labels.

5. **Use the Menus and Work Screens**

Work with data on work screens which are accessed through the “Edit Menu.” All the fields you need to work with are there. It is not efficient to attempt to edit on the report screens. They are designed for viewing and printing only. However, editing on report screens is possible, and there may be some occasions when it is preferable. Remember that no matter what layout you are working on, the data in the database is changed universally. For example, if you change a label on the “Labels” work screen, it is automatically changed on the “Production Label Schedule.”

6. **Look Before You Delete!**

Be careful not to delete records or groups of records accidentally. They cannot be restored. There is no “Undo” command. Unlike word processors, FileMaker memorizes entries on the fly, so you usually won’t lose information when your computer crashes. However, deleted data is gone forever. For this reason there are no program buttons in our database to delete files—you must use FileMaker’s “Mode” menu. The best way to insure safety is to back up files at least once a day.

7. **Always Back Up**

Backup your database often. A ZIP or CD backup is a convenient method. Keep all disks properly labeled. It is also useful to save a few generations of old files so you can revert to them if necessary. Just add “old” to their filenames.

8. **Don’t Format Database Entries**

Do not format text on FileMaker data entry or report screens. Font specifications are preset in our program, and additional formatting by the user will cause anomalies in reports. When writing labels, it is OK to indicate bold or italic words or phrases, such as a ship’s name. But do not attempt to change type sizes, leading, color, wordspacing, or other format specifications. If you want to record type specifications, make entries in the appropriate field on the “Labels” workscreen.

9. **Print the Right Thing**

Avoid printing snafu’s by reading print dialog boxes before clicking OK and sending files to print. FileMaker can print numerous things such as “Current Record”, “Records Being Browsed”, or “Field Definitions”. Make sure you select the one you want from the print dialog box. Also verify “Portrait” vs. “Landscape” options. Normally, when printing from our program menus, the correct options will be selected automatically. If you bypass the menus you may need to manually adjust dialog boxes.

10. **Work Your Own Way**

As long as you retain the basic structure of the database and maintain the NPS numbering system, you can have a lot of freedom in customizing your work screens and reports. It is not recommended that you change field names, but you can add a field or two if needed in your project. If you are a contractor, check with your COTR before making changes. Changes to a project file will not affect the NPS master template file.

Because our application is derived from the parent FileMaker Pro software, we have all the functionality of the parent database. If we had had a custom database designed for us from scratch using code, we would not be able to constantly refine and develop the database on our desktops.

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